

Navy News, October 11, 2007

Great Lakes, MN. -- Former astronaut and retired Capt. James A. Lovell was recognized Oct. 5 when the joint DoD/Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital was named in his honor at a special ceremony on VA grounds.

Participating in the event was Navy Surgeon General Vice Adm. Adam M. Robinson Jr.; Department of Veterans Affairs Acting Secretary Gordon Mansfield; U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk; Naval Health Clinic Great Lakes Commanding Officer Capt. Thomas McGue; Medical Center Director Patrick L. Sullivan; and Actor/Director Gary Sinise.

A room packed with Navy military personnel, veterans, family members, and hospital staff listened as Lovell express his appreciation and gratitude for having his name associated with the first-of-its-kind military hospital.

"I can imagine no greater honor than this," said the former spacecraft commander of Apollo 13, the astronaut's fourth and final space flight.

"This is a big boost for service members," he noted.

"I am thinking about all the people who will be using this hospital in the future."

Lovell was one of the group of nine astronauts selected for the space program by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in September 1962. His three flights, preceding Apollo 13, included two missions with the Gemini program and the Apollo 8 mission when he served as command module pilot and navigator.

The former astronaut thanked Kirk and others for their tenacity in following through to make the hospital a reality.

The James A. Lovell VA-DoD Federal Health Care Facility is expected to serve an estimated 100,000 veterans, active-duty personnel, and family members annually after its completion in 2010.

Kirk, a longtime supporter of the facility, thanked "all those who saved this veteran's hospital." The VA medical center was considered for closure several years ago.

He declared that, "We were working with the [Department of Veterans Affairs] and the Navy to find a name that would inspire veterans and also kids. We believe that James Lovell is a living inspiration for Americans."

Robinson said that, "Great Lakes is critical to our Navy. It has the only Recruit Training Command, and its hospital corpsmen are the backbone of the Navy Medical Department. Navy medicine's number one priority is readiness," he added. "It takes care of wounded warriors and veterans and family members.

"We have a way ahead about how we are going to do military health care. We are going to do something new and different. This partnership enables us to maintain a continuum of care. The Navy and the VA have a history of sharing," said Robinson.

"This partnership will allow us to expand our teaching and research," Sullivan declared.

Sinise, who was scheduled to perform with his Lt. Dan Band for Navy personnel later in the day, said he was proud to participate in the event "to honor our American hero James Lovell."